Rwanda’s paradox of remembering and suffering

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The decadence of humanity is apparent in the history of the twentieth century. Two world wars and at least three genocides: Armenians crossed off our maps, Jews slain in gas chambers, and Tutsi with their throats slit by machetes in Rwanda. This grim picture is counterbalanced in the following article by reflections on how to transform genocide into processes that heal.

Occasions of massive violence have significantly provoked the advent of testimonial accounts. Jean Norton Cru, through his analyses and critiques of accounts of World War I, asked himself, as a precursor, about the conditions for the possibility of a literature of testimony. From April to July 1994, an estimated 1,000,000 people were killed in Rwanda; this means at least 10,000 were killed every single day for three months.

This extermination was not a product of emotional reaction. It was systematically planned by the Rwandan State. Political parties and the administration were engaged to exterminate the Tutsi population. How does the remembrance of such evil obligate us here and now? For survivors, to remember is to tell their story, to testify that genocide took place, they survived, and they lost their relatives.

During a symposium on Human Rights, an African politician, addressing the assembly, declared: ‘Every human being has the right to life… No one can be deprived arbitrarily of this right.’ Upon hearing these words, several survivors of Tutsi genocide in the audience held back tears. There is much to be considered about the scepticism of the survivors. That the affirmation alone of such an evident truth, of an axiom so totally and so simply human, seems to the victims to be derisive or insulting, reflects on the exact level of the morality of our times and the cynicism of our politicians.

Why these tears? Not because such a declaration seems false in itself, but because it seems absurd in the abyss in which the 20th century has left us. Does not our entire civilization carry contempt for human life? Let us count: three genocides, at least, and two world wars! Death, in the forms it has taken, submits to the law of numbers: we kill in series like we produce toys and machetes. To a certain degree, human rationality no longer understands the horror of the numbers. It is no longer extermination, but instead a statistic or a detail of history.

Let us return, then, to the beginning when the memory of the genocide revealed a politician’s propaganda. Were the survivors wrong to ‘look back’ during the symposium?

‘Don’t look back!’

We know the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Gods, humans, wild animals or birds: everything succumbs to the voice of the poet. Alas, he loses his dear Eurydice, bitten by a serpent. Orpheus is worn down by grief. He decides to descend to the underworld to seek from Hades Eurydice’s return to life. He gets Eurydice’s shadow to follow him, but he must not look back. The fear of losing that which he loves is strong. He must reassure himself. The poor man, unable to resist, breaks the command; and the image of Eurydice evaporates.

When the poet dies, his soul will not be allowed to return to look at his loved one. We accept that the abyss that separates the survivors and the dead is insurmountable. Can we say that sometimes the survivor is among the living and his people have disappeared? Can we separate him from these people? Does not the destiny of the
survivor lie in the realization that Orpheus no longer lives with Eurydice?

The stories of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah carry the idea of moral and/or political excess. The fact remains that an unusual scene announces the imminent destruction of two cities. The Lot family can save itself if it respects this decree: ‘Escape for thy life; look not behind thee neither stay thou in all the Plain; escape to the mountain lest thou be consumed.’ And it continues! The cities were put to fire and sword; Lot’s wife defies the command and becomes a column of salt.

‘Look not behind thee!’ comes like an order to not turn back to the catastrophic scenes. One could say that the command does not necessarily concern the return to the indicated places, but instead prevents the risks of a memory that takes away the person that carries it. Salt, in certain texts of the Old Testament, refers to the idea of punishment, of desolation and poison, yet on the other hand, reveals itself as a substance of flavour and wisdom in other references.

‘Escape, lest thou be consumed.’ Escape to where? We go where we come from: we live with our executioners; we carry the signs of the genocide with us. Here we enter into the particular nature of the genocide of the Rwandan Tutsis. Alain Goldschläger, a Canadian scholar, has deplored the fact that the post-genocide situation does not constitute ‘a clean and final break’, the killers continue to live with the survivors.¹ He fears that testimony does not allow for, in this case, the possibility of ‘catharsis.’ There is a permanent risk of being transfixed by the gaze that focuses unavoidably on things of the past and on the victim, like the reflection of a mirror. Body, speech, and memory are all affected.

For the Cameroonian writer, Patrice Nganang, ‘Guhamuka exposes the connection between the trembling body and “the words that refuse to be said” in the passage of memory towards its narration.’² Perhaps the looking back and the salt statue simply represent the impossibility of seeing and narrating. Perhaps both expose the vulnerability of the victim who cannot look.

The Kinyarwanda verb ‘Guhamuka’ becomes frozen or liberated speech that seals the communion between the living and the dead. Claude Mouchard casts light upon the range of this word: ‘Is it primarily for a close friend, for a disappearing friend that you must talk about his death?’³ And if the dead spoke instead of the living? To whom does the voice belong, to whom does the message belong, in a testimony? Only fiction can answer this question.

The first Greek myth represents the impasse of a memory enclosed within itself. The distance that separates the dead and the survivors is unfathomable. The second Hebrew myth recalls the circumstances in which memory destroys the victim. Finally, the third myth refers to the possibilities of a fecund memory, or precisely what the Senegalese poet and sociologist, Babacar Sall, calls ‘fertile wound’. The paths of a fertile memory are steep and arduous. The merit consists in climbing them. Some pitfalls appear in the elaboration of the Tutsis’ writing of testimony.

The Sankofa myth comes from Africa. The taboo is lifted. Here we have it! The Akan culture spread throughout several countries of West Africa, shares the story of a mythic bird, the Sankofa. This bird walks or flies with his head always turned in the direction from which he came with an egg on his beak. Clearly, the egg symbolizes this future. This image has been adopted by several African-American centers and universities. The Sankofa’s task is difficult because he must look back; he must return to the place he has been to gain wisdom.

‘Look back to gain wisdom!’
The association of survivors of the Rwandan Tutsi genocide is called ‘Ibuka,’ which can be translated as ‘remember.’ The first objectives are defined in terms of memory and justice. ‘Remember,’ without a doubt, enters into the logic of memory. But we see that Ibuka was born out of urgent situations. The name ‘remember’ makes us think of the project of perpetuating the memory of the victims. We know that Ibuka works to ‘combat genocide and its consequences and prevent it from ever happening again.’

The urgencies consist of assisting and defending the rescued, researching evidence of the genocide officials’ involvement, fighting against impunity, and promoting and, of course, perpetuating the memory of the victims of the genocide. We will note that the question of memory comes in last. This is to say that, by responding to emergencies, ‘remember’ acts as part of a social programme.

Marie-Odile Godard reminds us that the infinitive “kwibuka,” “to remember,” is a social or communal act in the Rwandan tradition, because one remembers around a fire, as a family, with neighbours, to appease the dead. The memory becomes a pact between the living and the dead, provided that one doesn’t fall into Orpheus’ situation.4

The word “sankofa” means that one does not break a taboo if one looks back in order to learn to avoid the errors of the past. As with the idea of fertile memory, George Santayana says: ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’ And if this anamnesis if made up of a gaze, a journey, what will it become to a survivor of extreme violence who tries to ‘look back’? And what if he answers us with this adage: ‘In order to know where you are going, you have to know where you have been.’

Returning to the sites of torture, in the case of genocides, can only be returning to oneself. Murambi, Nyamata, and Nyamirambo engrave themselves on the body of the victim. But perhaps this return, without deceiving oneself of its goals, is a form of knowing that allows one to by-pass, to undo the traps hung over the paths of the future. This perspective has two facets. The first refers to a mummified, paralyzing, or petrifying memory. The other refers to useful memory or fertile memory. The perspective, in its second axis, presents itself as an adventure whose force is based on the idea of passion, including suffering.

It is because of this that the horizon of this perspective is ‘dangerous,’ as stated by Jean-Baptiste Metz.5 It is dangerous because, on the one hand, it is connected to the ‘memory of evil’. The fractured story, perhaps of the survivor, exposes the power of this troublesome memory. On the other hand, this joyless perspective comes as a last resort. We are confronted with the paradox of memory. Memory is both suffering and consolation.

The paradox of memory does not exclude the possibility of rubbing salt into the wound. The challenge consists in turning unacceptable and unjustified wounds into fertile wounds. This task exceeds the nature of survivors’ narratives. It involves the whole nation. As Babacar Sall pointed out:

‘The important thing is not only a common memory, but a collective future through the construction of another possible history. How to transform the genocide into a wound that is fruitful is the question summing up the Rwandan problem and will, which are contextualized in an Africa still mired in determinants that are as historic (slavery, colonization) as they are economic (under-development). Rwanda must add another element to this triptych: genocide, which no other African country has known in so brief and dense period. Rwanda’s specificity in the African context, and her will to transform the genocide’s wounded memory into a resource for establishing a new contract of confidence and solidarity between Rwandans, raises the question of
historical innovation. What should be a major handicap has been transformed into momentum, into enthusiasm for reinventing the nation, citizenship, and the nation-state on the basis of a new agreement.\textsuperscript{6}

A few clarifications are in order. Speaking of ‘fertile or productive wounds’ does not make genocide a ‘happy fault’, but rather reflects the determination of survivors to defy destiny or simply not to give up in the face of extreme violence. This determination is itself complex to the extent that there exists, on the one hand, a community of survivors for whom genocidal wounds do not derive solely from memory, but from a reality that inhabits the body, recalling what Aimé Césaire describes as ‘inhabiting a sacred wound’ or ‘inhabiting one’s wounds’.

On the other hand, ‘fertile wounds’ is also a social programme. To a certain degree, the survivor’s memory negotiates with the social contract defined by the State. The survivor thereby confronts the State, which sees in him or her one ‘citizen’ among many. Looking back for ‘fertile wounds’ is a paradigm: how can genocide be commemorated every year without being a ‘hostage to the past’?\textsuperscript{7} And how can society move on while standing up to revisionist movements and acknowledging the need to prevent future genocides?

Notes
5. I draw my inspiration from Jean-Baptiste Metz’s idea of ‘dangerous memory’, which he compared to the Christian celebration of Christ’s death and resurrection.
7. When President Paul Kagame received President Nicolas Sarkozy on February 25, 2010, they held a joint press conference in which Kagame said ‘We refused to be hostages of the past’ referring to the tumultuous relationship between Rwanda and France in relation to the Tutsi genocide.

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